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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0145
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0176
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 TASHKENT 000277

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DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, AND INR
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AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: "NUR" RELIGIOUS GROUP CRACKDOWN CONTINUES

REF: TASHKENT 177; TASHKENT 271

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CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Fitzmaurice, Poloff; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Summary: Authorities are continuing a widespread crackdown on suspected members of "Nur," a banned conservative (but not extremist) religious organization associated with Turkish scholar Fethullah Gullen (ref A). According to reports from independent and state-controlled media, at least 16 individuals have been imprisoned recently for membership in Nur and another 29 have been arrested across Uzbekistan. The imprisonment of five suspected Nur members associated with the Irmoq magazine - including Abdulaziz Dadahanov, a U.S. exchange program alumnus - has garnered the most attention from international media outlets. Most of the individuals arrested had studied at Turkish-Uzbek high schools in Uzbekistan, which were supported by Gullen until they were forced to close in 1999. In a documentary aired on state-controlled television, authorities alleged that Nur restarted its activities in Uzbekistan in 2006 and was actively recruiting alumni of Turkish-Uzbek high schools. End summary.

FIVE IRMOQ JOURNALISTS IMPRISONED

2. (U) As has been reported in international media outlets, the Tashkent City Criminal Court on February 26 sentenced five men associated with the Irmoq magazine - Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Ravshanbek Vafojev, Abdulaziz Dadahanov, and Botirbek Eshkuziyev - to between eight and twelve years' imprisonment each for membership in the banned religious organization Nur (ref A). Specifically, the men were convicted of violating criminal code article 244 part two (preparing and distributing literature posing a threat to public security and order) and article 244 part one (participating in a banned religious organization). A February 27

article on the independent Ferghana.ru website reported that Irmoq's former editor Khamza Jumayev testified that Irmoq and its sister-publication "Yeti Iqlim" received financial support from Nur leaders based in the Kazakh city of Shymkent. According to a February 28 article on the independent Uznews.net website, all five men testified that they were not Nur members and that the charges against them were fabricated.

13. (C) On February 20, independent human rights activist Ismoil Adilov, who has been monitoring the Irmoq case, provided poloff with a copy of the indictment against the five men. The court document, dated December 23, 2008, states that all five men had given written statements that they were members of the Nur religious group and also had written "letters of regret." According to the indictment, an investigation allegedly uncovered that Bakhrom Ibragimov recruited new members for Nur by reestablishing contacts with classmates of the Turkish-Uzbek school "Fatkh." The group allegedly met together on the last Sunday of each month, received financial assistance from other Nur members, and distributed "religious extremist materials." The indictment was signed by NSS Investigator Captain R.M. Mamatkulov and approved by Chief of the NSS Investigation Department of Uzbekistan Lieutenant Colonel R.R. Nurmatov.

CNN PROFILES DADAHANOV'S PLIGHT

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14. (C) Dadahanov, a UGRAD (U.S. government university-level international exchange program) alumnus who studied in Connecticut, was the subject of a lengthy March 10 article on the CNN.com website which included shocked reactions from his American friends. A mutual acquaintance recently told a PAS locally-employed staff (LES) member that Dadahanov's mother-in-law had last seen him two weeks ago and that he appeared to be in good health. Dadahanov is reportedly still being held at a pre-trial detention facility awaiting transfer to another prison. He was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment at a "general regime labor camp" (a medium-security facility.)

NSS ALLEGEDLY THREATEN DADAHANOV'S WIFE

15. (C) The mutual acquaintance also reported to a PAS FSN employee that National Security Service (NSS) officers have been in constant contact with Dadahanov's wife Aziza and have warned her not to talk to reporters, including those from CNN. They also have reportedly threatened that if she does not cooperate with them, they will have Dadahanov transferred to the Jaslyk prison in Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic (Note: Jaslyk, located in one of the most barren and isolated corners of the country, has a reputation of being Uzbekistan's worst prison. End note.) In exchange for cooperation, the NSS officers also reportedly offered to transfer Dadahanov to a prison with better conditions or even have him eventually amnestied and released.

ENGLISH CENTERS FORCED TO CLOSE

16. (C) In addition, the mutual acquaintance reported to our PAS FSN that approximately 20 English centers associated with

individuals who had studied at Turkish-Uzbek schools have been forced to close across Uzbekistan. Dadahanov was associated with one such center in Tashkent, which employed 30 teachers and accommodated roughly 600 students. The mutual acquaintance was also forced to close his own English center, although he has not been charged with Nur membership. While the acquaintance denied that he was a member of Nur, he reported that Dadahanov was invited to Nur meetings by other graduates of Turkish-Uzbek high schools and possessed literature by Said Nursi (Nur's founder) and Gullen.

TRIAL ONGOING FOR "YETI IQLIM" JOURNALISTS

¶7. (U) On March 5, the independent Harakat.net website reported that a trial was ongoing for three individuals associated with Irmoq's sister publication "Yeti Iqlim" who have been charged with membership in Nur. The three individuals include journalist Davron Tojiev, distributor Sahvkat Ismoilov, and Namangan-based imam

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Mamadali Shahobiddinov. According to the article, Shahobiddinov had previously won a world-wide contest for his recital of the Koran, and was the only one of the three defendants who was directly connected with Nur.

UZBEK TELEVISION AIRS SCATHING DOCUMENTARY ON NUR

¶8. (U) Recently, state-controlled Uzbek television aired a documentary entitled "The Beam, Leading into Darkness" on Nur, describing the organization as an extremist sect led by Gullen which aims to establish a pan-Turkic state in Eurasia. The documentary claimed that Uzbek-Turkish high schools in Uzbekistan were forced to close in the 1990s because they allegedly disseminated Nur propaganda. Quoting "religious expert" Uygun Gofurov, the program reported that the schools were established as boarding institutions so that Nur members could indoctrinate pupils far away from their relatives and family. Another "Islamic expert," Nuriymom Abdulhasan, was quoted as stating that the schools promoted pan-Turkism, so that "Nur's actions under the guise of free aid have undermined our centuries-old national values and damaged the future life of knowledgeable and talented young Uzbek people."

¶9. (U) The documentary claimed that "the evil intention behind [Nur's] generosity was disclosed" in 1999, leading to criminal cases against several sect members studying at Uzbek universities and "three Turkish members." Starting in 2006, the documentary claimed that Nur resumed activities in Uzbekistan and that "Turkish nationals, who were deported from Uzbekistan for promoting religious extremist, fanatic, and pan-Turkic views in the past, started entering the country...using new tactics for promoting the sect's ideas...a tactic of controlling Uzbeks through Uzbeks themselves. The Turkish citizens found their former students, members of Nur, gave them instructions and orders...training and languages centers were set up, newspapers and magazines were issued."

¶10. (U) The documentary reported that Nur member Bahrom Ibragimov (one of the convicted Irmoq journalists) recruited Khamza Jumayev (Irmoq's editor, who also is a well-known television journalist)

and paid him 1,000 dollars a month to dub and broadcast "Turkish" films. Jumayev was quoted as stating that the manager of his television station refused to broadcast the films, and that he received a total of 8,000 dollars from Ibragimov. The documentary also noted that Jumayev had graduated from an Uzbek-Turkish high school in Bukhara. The documentary made no specific mention of Irmoq.

¶11. (U) The documentary also reported that an Uzbek court on February 16 sentenced eight individuals - Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiyev, Olimjon Musayev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov, and Baxt Abdugaffarov - to between six and half and eight years' imprisonment for membership in Nur. In addition, Uzbek law enforcement had recently uncovered a Nur sect in Bukhara led by Ikrom Merajov and seized literature and correspondence with Turkish Nur leaders at his home. The documentary also reported that law enforcement in the town of Asaka

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in Andijon province had uncovered a group of female Nur leaders and seized literature, video tapes, and CDs from their homes.

REPORTS OF ADDITIONAL NUR ARRESTS ACROSS UZBEKISTAN

¶12. (U) On March 6, Harakat.net reported that four individuals suspected of Nur membership had been recently arrested in Namangan, including Turkish-Uzbek high school graduate Muhammadjon Sobirov. The article also reported that three unknown individuals were imprisoned for membership in Nur in Tashkent in December 2008. On February 17, Harakat.net reported that Mansurali Arraboev, an instructor at Tashkent's Islamic Institute, was arrested for suspected Nur membership.

¶13. (C) A PAS LES employee reported studying at university with Sobirov. He explained that Sobirov had not graduated from a Turkish-Uzbek high school, but had studied abroad for one year in Turkey and had worked previously at a Turkish company in Namangan. Before his arrest, he was working for the Namangan branch of Nestle Uzbekistan. As far as the PAS LES knew, Sobirov had no connection to Nur or any other religious sect.

¶14. (C) On March 10, Forum 18 reported that university lecturer Ikrom Merajov (featured in Uzbek television documentary, see para 10) was arrested along with eight other men in Bukhara for suspected membership in Nur. The men were reportedly arrested in December 2008 after police raided a meeting at Merajov's home and seized religious literature, including works by Nur's founder Said Nursi. The men are currently being held at NSS pre-trial detention facilities in Bukhara. Human rights activist Shukhrat Ganiev had earlier reported the arrest of suspected Nur members in Bukhara (ref A). According to a February 27 Forum 18 article, 12 suspected members of Nur also had been arrested in Khorezm province.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) One link tying many of the individuals arrested for Nur membership together is that they are alumni of Turkish-Uzbek high schools. While at least some of the evidence used against them appears to be fabricated, it also seems that some of those arrested

were actual Nur members. Why the authorities have undertaken such a widespread crackdown against Nur at this point remains unclear. On one hand, this may be just part of the general crackdown on independent Muslims groups which has been ongoing (with periodic waxing and waning) since the late 1990s. There does not appear to be much of a connection to Turkey itself, at least as far as the Turkish Embassy in Tashkent is concerned (although the Turkish Ambassador characterizes the bilateral relationship these days as poor and unproductive). Nevertheless, Nur might be seen as a double ideological threat by the Uzbek government, as it promotes not only a conservative interpretation of Islam, but also pan-Turkism and the creation of a single Turkic state in Eurasia. On the other hand, it is also possible that many of these arrests and convictions are simply fabricated by law enforcement officials

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seeking to justify their relatively fat budgets to superiors.

¶16. (C) The Uzbeks continue to show signs (ref B) that they think U.S. dependence on Uzbekistan for Afghan transit (NDN) may give them more leeway to ignore our human rights concerns. Our challenge remains to show them this is not the case, without in fact undermining important equities in Afghanistan. The sooner we engage the Uzbeks at an authoritative Administration level on the interplay between these issues and develop mechanisms for addressing them, the better.

NORLAND